GOD'S HUMILITY
Thursday morning, March 13, 1980
Muskingum College

~~The third main thread has to do with power - its nature its accumulation and its use.~~ Let me introduce the subject by way of a vignette from history and an important and pivotal passage of scripture.

In 42 BC two armies met on a plain outside the city of Philippe. One army was commanded by conspirators who recently had assassinated Julius Caesar. Their names - Brutus and Cassius. The other army was under two loyalists, Mark Antony and Octavian. The armies of Antony and Octavian were victorious at Philippi. The battle marks the real beginning of the Roman Empire and the emergence of Octavian as Head of State - Emperor. The Roman senate conferred the title Augustus Caesar on him.

Octavius must have had a soft spot in his heart for the place where his dramatic rise to power began because one of the first things he did was rebuild Philippi, on the model of a miniature Rome, and populate it with his old soldiers. It was given the rank of colony. It would have had something of the character of a military base. Its mentality would have been martial. And in Philippi, a Roman citizen by the name of Paul, had planted the seeds of a Christian church.

These are the people to whom ~~he~~ Paul wrote a letter containing what was to become one of the most important and certainly one of the most eloquent passages in the Bible. Philippians 2:5-11..."Have

read it

this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself...humbled himself, became obedient..."

The old soldiers of Philippi would have understood the business about obedience unto death. That is the military code. It was the self-emptying, the humility, the conscious renunciation of power which they would have tripped on, and which was so opposite from everything they had lived by. A soldier understands power. You don't renounce it, you use it on your enemy. You don't empty yourself: you protect and extend yourself at the expense of your opponent. Nowhere does the Gospel of Jesus Christ stand in such sharp contrast to the world as in the passage written, perhaps for the old soldiers of Philippi. Self-emptying - humility are here defined as characteristics of the new life in Christ, and that, in any age, is radically different.

the basis of military power.

The world, after all, operates largely on a power basis. It always has. But the fundamental religious ques tion asked by every generation since the beginning of time has to do with power; namely, if God is all powerful, why do his people suffer? We ask that question every time a good and dear friend, a relative, a generous human being, is struck down prematurely. Why? Why does God let it happen? Why do God's enemies prosper and his friends suffer? Why doesn't God do something?

why doesn't he show it? *

* When Russia wants to declare its power, it uses a May Day Parade to drag out a few thousand missiles. When we are displeased with the behavior of a nation, we dispatch a carrier to show itself in the vicinity. Why can't God do something like that?

The question is asked in literature over and over again but nowhere more urgently than the ancient Jews at the time of their exile in Babylon. In the beginning they perceived their God in the same terms as their neighbors. Tribal deities gave power to their people: the more powerful the tribe or nation, the more powerful the deity. Prosperity, economic strength and military conquests, even the number of concubines enjoyed by the King were all seen as evidence of God's power and glory. In brief, God was established by the power and strength of those who claimed his name. During the reigns of kings like David, Solomon and Uzziah it was easy to believe that the God of Israel was Lordof all, and his people chosen from among the whole human race. But it didn't last long: the system began to unravel in a civil war, a split into two nations, questionable alliances, finally invasion and conquest. In 587 Jerusalem was vanquished and Solomon's Temple, the very sign of God's power and presence, was leveled and the population deported.

Swiss theologian, physician

Paul Tournier observes: "For a nation which has so totally identified its destiny with the power of Jahweh, it is much more than a military defeat, it is a religious calamity, the collapse of the very foundation of its faith. Having for so long proved God by the success of those who served him they began to doubt him in the face of this complete catastrophe. Where is God's power?" (The Violence Within, p. 107)

There it is - the age old predicament of faith. Why the awful silence of God? Why do the innocent suffer? Why not peace and harmony instead of war and suffering?

A moment of pure revelation and one of the turning points in the history of religious thought, came when a prophet, left behind in Judah, wrote to the exiles in Babylon to the effect that God himself suffers with them, that he identifies with them, that he becomes weak for their sakes, that he chooses humility.

The prophet used an image of a suffering servant and his words are among the most poignant in all the language of religion.

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted
yet he opened not his mouth:
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like sheep that before its shearers is dumb,
so he opened not his mouth."

or even about God's friends.

What an incredible way to be talking about God. What a vast contrast between that and the brazen and vulgar religions of the world with their petty tyrant gods flexing their muscles and commanding obeisance at the threat of death. We have not always understood it, but God's chosen humility has been the essential part of our tradition since that time long ago.

Jesus knew about the words of the prophet. He seems to have understood his mission in life in terms of the Prophet's description of God's suffering servant. The motif of self-emptying, humility and the total renunication of power is, I submit, the most consistent in his life. He advised his followers, for instance, to become like little children. He told them that

the man who exalts himself will be humbled. He said that in his kingdom the first will be last and the last first. He suggested that the way to receive life was to lose it, and the guaranteed way to lose it was to try to grasp it. And in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the time of his arrest he said it plainly - "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defense?", and then allowed himself to be taken away by the guards.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a radical alternative to the use of power which characterizes the world. Let's think about that for a moment. We have all experienced the strange and compelling way in which power translates itself into violence. A normally placid and peace loving person can, and often does, become aggressive, belligerent, pushy and violent at the wheel of a several hundred horsepower automobile. Child abuse, one of the truly alarming problems in our culture is a pure example of power becoming violence, encouraged by the degree of violence the culture both allows and celebrates. But far short of physical abuse, every parent knows how easy it is, because of inherent power, to do verbal and emotional violence to one's children. It took me a long time to come to terms with it, but I am beginning to see that power always has the potential of violence within it. Tournier, who has written an excellent book on the subject helped me to see that. He writes: "The more powerful we are, the greater the constraint, open or hidden, which we exercise upon others,

and the more we thus provoke them to violent reactions." (ob. cit., p. 114) That is a helpful insight as we think about and are astonished by the intense hatred some of the Iranian people seem to feel toward us.

One of the truly disturbing assertions in Tournier's book which he documents thoroughly is that "power confers impunity on violence." From Julius Caesar on down, powerful men have rationalized their own violence. "If you are powerful, your violence can escape all retribution. Power is secured by violence, and violence is justified by power." (ob. cit., p. 115) Thus even the bombing of Cambodia could be called a "protective reaction strike." I would guess that no person in authority - power ever acknowledged that he had had too much power.

You don't have to look far for the proof of that particular pudding. The history of Christianity has been an object lesson in the corruption of power. Many scholars contend that the very worst thing ever to happen to the church was its becoming the State religion of Rome by edict of the Emperor Constantine. Certainly its worst mistakes have been committed at the height of its secular power. The verbal violence of a religious leader in modern Iran has been preceded by other similar abuses against human freedom and dignity - on the part of Christian leaders.

Yet we continue to be fascinated with power. Institutionally, we evaluate the effectiveness of the church on the basis of its size, wealth and strength. Big - even in churches - is beautiful. And we have made personal power into a kind of religious quest. EST, Assertiveness Training, are important

(*) when it has accumulated power (13th cent. Papacy) & church behaved as badly as anybody else. It's leaders lived in luxury (gothic rd.), it stamped out opposition, sold positions of prestige to highest bidder.

(please remember that in Am. Hist. it has been in not career diplomat, but Power Corporation head - can't even speak Russian!) and absolutely refused even to discuss the possibility of reform.

phenomena today. We are encouraged to flex our muscles, push our weight around, take nothing from anyone and to insist, as a matter of principle, that we have the right to have things our way. My, I'm weary of self-assertiveness. I appreciate the psychological reality that many of us could stand a little more self-esteem, but we have turned the search into an obsession, the result of which has become the "Me Generation." It all came home to me in a surprising way recently, encountering it personally. I was waiting a bit impatiently at an intersection while the driver of the car in front of me conducted an animated conversation with several young ladies in a van. It went on for some time. Finally, I suggested that they might terminate the conversation and allow me to proceed by blowing my horn. The driver in front of me put his car in gear and pulled ahead. The girls in the van, however, pulled directly beside me, the driver looked me in the eye, made the one universally recognized obscene gesture not two feet from my face, and in the richest Anglo-Saxon co-bination of four letter words I had heard for some time gave me a concise analysis of my personality, looks and ancestry. I was totally surprised - stunned - then angry, and finally very sad. We have used self-assertiveness as a socially accepted excuse for unvarnished adolescent selfishness. We have used the psychologically legitimate need for self-esteem as an excuse to bulldoze anyone who stands in our way. Friedrich Nietzsche, a philosopher who loathed the emphasis on humility in the Christian faith, called it the triumph of small ness and weakness and offered instead a celebration of strength and power which

Nazi theoreticians eagerly used to give legitimacy to their Master-race ideologies. We have, in this culture - at this time - begun to behave in a way Nietzsche would have approved. Power is the name of the game.

We buy books which advise how to "Win through Intimidation." We even arrange our office furniture so that the boss sits slightly higher than anyone else. But even though it is our current obsession - integrity demands the observation that power does not work. It is one of the grandest of delusions; perhaps the biggest lie of all - that might makes right, or that it even works over the long run.

Power can change behavior but it cannot convert one single mind. Parents discover that almost daily with their children. A child can be forced to behave in a certain way out of fear. But that will not translate into respect, or more importantly, into self conscious responsible behavior unless there is something more than power involved. The cause of Jesus Christ was not advanced when the church controlled the minds of men and women, or when conversions were effected by force. In romance, we discover that love can never use power to work its will, for if it does, it will negate itself and remain empty and alone. Power - our greatest temptation - simply doesn't work...

In fact, there is a curious way in which real power never resorts to force, but is expressed in restraint. It is difficult to resist the temptation but thus far the power of our nation has been eloquently expressed in what we have

not done in Iran. The philosopher Georges Gusdorf observed that, "despite appearances, violence is more a sign of weakness than of strength. Violence is the opposite of strength, for the energy it brings to bear is the energy of despiar... The stronger one is, the less one needs to show one's strength." (Tournier, ibid., p. 11)

Power doesn't work. Love works. Strong love which never coerces, never forces, is never violent. When God wanted to give the gift of salvation to his creation he had, one must assume, any number of alternatives. When he wanted to show people how to live fully, joyfully, eternally, he could have made it mandatory. But it wouldn't have worked that way. God, in infinite wisdom, chose to become humble...

Sitting in prison, waiting for his execution by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer had plenty of time to think about God's power in the context of real, worldly, military power. And he wrote: "God allows himself to be edged out of the world and unto a cross. God is weak and powerless in the world and that is exactly the way in which he can be with us and help us." (Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 164)

The Incarnation, our genius, means that God loves humanity so much that he made himself vulnerable to and for humanity. We are the only people in the world to approach so preposterous a suggestion. In Jesus Christ God voluntarily laid aside prerogative and power and assumed the identity of a servant. God puts humself at the disposal of

humanity. Juergan Moltman radically exposes our fundamental genius in a book with the provocative title The Crucified God, in which he suggests that God wasn't a spectator at the crucifixion. He experienced it. God, Moltman argues, died for us.

Elie Wiesel keeps the issue before us even when we don't want to think about it. For him the Holocaust has forever changed the landscape of theology. With Jewish theologians like Richard Rubenstein, nothing will ever be the same for Wiesel, After Auschwitz. But Wiesel tells one story which almost compels a Christian response. He recalls, as a little boy, being forced to watch the Nazi's hang a Jewish child. It was a ghastly experience, even in a totally ghastly world. The child died slowly and behind him in the crowd of men forced to watch someone cried out "Where is God? Where is he? Where can he be now?" And a voice inside Weisel answered: "He is there - hanging on the gallows." Wiesel meant that the God of hope, love and victory died for him in that experience.

But Francois Mauriac, in the introduction to Wiesel's book Night - frames the issue for Christians - "What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, - the crucified...Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone to mine, and that the conformity between the cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished." (Night, p. 10)

Aristotle said it couldn't be. If he wanted to be God, he couldn't be vulnerable. Albert Camus, who spent his whole literary life wrestling with the issue came down on the side of Aristotle concluding that "God remains completely unaffected by the ills that befall us and is the eternal bystander whose back is turned to the woe of the world." (see Schubert Ogden, The Reality of God, p. 57)

And so when he decided to come among us, into human history, it was in a very humble birth, and a most ordinary life and it all ended in a gesture of meekness so humble that it was missed by all but a very few. God, we believe, chose and chooses to be known among us, not in thunder and lightning: not in the imperial majesty of Christendom, not even in the Gothic majesty of a grand cathedral: people have always seen their gods in nature and grandiose power plays and architecture monuments. God, we believe, chose humility to reveal himself and to teach us a lesson about power.

Paul sketched the dilemma with sensitivity:

> "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."